

Review: Compelling documentary 'Diaries from Lebanon' captures hope and despair on screen



CHENNAI: A trio including two women and one man are the protagonists of Myriam El-Hajj's documentary, "Diaries from Lebanon," which received a fantastic reception at the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Over the span of four years, El-Hajj documents the trials and tribulations of their lives, and she spins their stories into a film of 110 minutes. Tightly knit and passionately narrated, it is a fascinating watch.



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Produced by Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Qatar and France, El-Hajj's work begins in 2018 when a fiery feminist author and poet, Joumana Haddad, turns into a no-nonsense activist. Of course, she takes the most democratic path in the beginning and stands for election to the Lebanese Parliament, but just 24 hours

later, she is thrown out in a horribly fraudulent manner. Her supporters are furious, and some months later the people's rage snowballs into a revolution with hundreds of thousands joining in.

One among the masses is Perla Joe Maalouli. She is young and livid about the way her freedom of expression is being stifled. The camera — handled by El-Hajj, Mohamed Siam and Jihad Saad — captures her angst and her pain. In fact, she becomes the symbol of the revolution, demonstrating the frustration of the country's youth.

The third protagonist is George, who often thinks about the past, one incident in particular. At the start of the civil war, he shoots down a bus and keeps bragging about how he could have managed the struggle much better than the current crop of protestors.

When El-Hajj explores the life and times of George, her documentary runs like an investigative reportage, which is quite interesting. This layer enriches the narrative, following the twists and turns of the political mess in Lebanon. El-Hajj's voiceover fills in and talks about her own political and private feelings. Woven into all this is the deadly 2020 explosion in Beirut's port that destroys part of the city and also changes the lives of Haddad, Maalouli and George.

“Diaries From Lebanon” is a powerfully told story about a country in turmoil, which, as we are told, swings between hope and disappointment, passion and despair. El-Hajj captures the emotions of the everyday man in a compelling way in this must-watch.
